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ABSTRACT

Little research has focused on the particular characteristics necessary to gain and retain social support. To examine whether individuals' differing social support level could be differentiated on social skill level and physical appearance, and if these differences apply equally to males and females, 168 college students (84 males, 84 females) were randomly paired and videotaped in two dyadic situations with a same sex partner. Subjects also completed the Loneliness Questionnaire, a social situations story completion task, and self/partner evaluations. An analysis of the results showed significant differences in the social skills of subjects high and low in social support. People who described themselves as low in number of social supports were less favorably evaluated by their partners than were those subjects high in social support. Higher social competence levels were associated with a higher level of social support. The results also indicated sex differences in social behavior and in self-appraisal of social skills. Women were found to be significantly more socially skilled and were rated as being more physically attractive than men. The various self-report and behavioral measures of social skills were significantly interrelated. The results help to delineate the dimensions of social support by demonstrating the relationship between social support and social skill. (Author/BL)

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Social Skills, Attractiveness and Gender: Factors in Perceived Social Support

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Note: The information presented in this handout is seen as a supplement to the poster presented at WPA (April, 1984). A complete report as to what was done and what we found may be obtained from the authors on request.

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Abstract

Up to the present time the literature on social support has focused on the development of instruments with which to measure social support and on the relationship of this support to physical and psychological well-being. An important factor in having a sufficient support system is that people need certain basic skills to get and maintain interpersonal relationships. As yet there is no clear picture of the particular characteristics necessary to gain and retain social support. While it makes intuitive sense that social support level and social skill level are positively related there is insufficient evidence that this is indeed the case. The present study was designed to experimentally verify whether individuals differing in social support level could be differentiated on social skill level and physical appearance, and if these differences apply equally to males and females. Additionally, the study was designed to determine the relationship between behavioral self-report measures and independent observer ratings of videotaped behavior. Subjects were 84 male and 84 female introductory psychology students selected on the basis of high or low scores on the Social Support Questionnaire. The subjects were randomly paired and were videotaped in two dyadic situations with a same sex partner. Subjects completed the Loneliness Questionnaire, a special social competence questionnaire, a social situations story completion task and self/partner evaluations. The videotaped behavior was rated qualitatively and quantitatively. Significant differences were found in the social skills of subjects high and low in social support; people who describe themselves as low in number of social supports are less favorably evaluated by their partners than are those subjects high in social support. Higher social competence levels were associated with a higher level of social support. Also, the results indicate sex differences in social behavior and in self-appraisal of social skills; women were found to be significantly more socially skilled and were rated as being more physically attractive than men. The various self-report and behavioral measures of social skills were significantly inter-related. The results help to delineate the dimensions of social support by demonstrating the relationship between social support and social skill.

Introduction

Much of the initial interest in the notion of social support has been as a result of its perceived utility in prevention and rehabilitation (Iscoe, Bloom & Spielberger, 1977; Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983; Sarason, Sarason, Hacker & Basham, 1983). The literature on social support has focused on health oriented studies and on the variety of attempts at developing a social support measurement device.

In Heller's (1979) excellent review of the effects of social support on prevention and its treatment implications, he stated that "if basic skills needed to access and maintain interpersonal relationships are absent, linking individuals to supportive environments is not likely to succeed without prior programs emphasizing social skills training." Up to now, there has been little empirical research as to the particular characteristics necessary for individuals to get and keep social supports. Rather than focusing on the relationship of social support to other self-report measures, there is a need to assess social support in relationship to behavioral observations made by others. Also, although it makes intuitive sense that social support level and social skill level are positively related, there are no experimental studies which directly address this area.

The study on which we report here was conceived as a way of experimentally determining whether individuals with differing perceptions of the amount of available social support could be differentiated on social skill level and physical appearance, and if such differences did exist, the extent to which they would apply equally to males and females. In addition, the study was designed to determine the relationship between behavioral self-report measures and independent observer ratings of videotaped behavior.

Method

Subjects

A total of 168 subjects participated in the study (84 males, 84 females). Each subject received course credit in an Introductory Psychology course for their participation. The 168 subjects were selected on the basis of the number of supportive persons in their life (SSQN score). This score is one of two scores yielded by the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) (Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983). The 168 subjects represented those whose SSQN scores were in the highest and lowest quintiles of the original 1200 students who had completed the SSQ prior to testing.

Experimental Design

A 2x2x2 factorial design was employed with the three factors being: Social Support Questionnaire Number score (SSQN) of the subject (high or low), the SSQN of the subject's partner (high or low), and the sex of the subject pair. A list of all subject pairs needed to complete the design was prepared and the order of the pairs was randomized. High and low SSQN subjects were randomly assigned to an apprpriate pair until all experimental cells were complete.

Experimental Procedure

Subjects were contacted by phone and asked to participate in a communication experiment. When the subjects arrived for the experiment they were met and led into the experimental room by the experimenter who was not aware of their SSQN score. The experimental room was a video studio which contained two arm chairs, a small table with a plant and a videocamera about 15 feet away from the subjects. The experimenter gave the subject pair instructions that they would be participating in an experiment looking at communication between people and would be videotaped in two five minute

conversations. For the first conversation the subjects were told to act as they normally would when they meet someone for the first time (getting acquainted roleplay).

The experimenter then left the room and videotaped the interaction for 5 minutes from an adjacent monitoring booth. At the end of 5 minutes, the experimenter re-entered the experimental room and gave the subjects their second roleplay situation. This situation revolved around the two subjects having to talk about improving a difficult living situation with a hypothetical third roommate.

Again, the experimenter left the room and taped the roleplay. After this second 5 minute period the experimenter returned and asked the subjects to complete various self-report questionnaires. After the questionnaires had been filled out by the subjects, the experimenter returned and took a Polaroid color photograph of each subject.

Dependent Measures

Experimenter ratings: These were intuitive and blind assignments by the experimenter of subjects to high or low social support categories. At the same time the experimenter rated each subject's social competence on a scale from 1-100.

Videotape ratings: These ratings were made from each of the two roleplay interactions and included both quantitative and qualitative measures. They were scored according to manuals constructed from pilot data (special thanks to Rosalie Burnett who was a primary force in constructing the rating manuals and who trained many of the raters to use the manuals).

The qualitative raters made a series of judgments on 7 point rating scales. The items included a variety of topics (e.g., submissive vs.

assertive, makes irrelevant contributions vs. makes relevant contributions, nervous gestures vs. communicative gestures, etc.), these having been operationally defined in the manual. There were four qualitative raters who achieved inter-rater reliability of at least r=.80 before beginning the rating process. This process was as follows: each rater was assigned a random selection of tapes with the raters meeting once a week for continued reliability checks. Each rater viewed their assigned tapes 6 times, each viewing affording ratings for a particular group of items for each subject in counterbalanced order. The groups of items included measures of; non-verbal behavior, global effectiveness in the interaction, quality of the interaction, quality of the problem-solving roleplay, verbal content, vocal qualities, and postural (body) qualities. Since a factor analysis indicated that the measures loaded on one principal factor they were eventually combined into a single qualitative score.

The quantitative raters measured the total time of occurrence of a variety of specific behaviors during each roleplay. Again, four different raters viewed a random selection of tapes, and using a digital timer, coded the duration of the various behaviors defined in the instruction manual. The coded behaviors included the number of seconds of speech duration, eye contact while speaking, and eye contact while not speaking (a measure of listening). The quantitative raters were trained to an inter-rater reliability of r=.90 or better.

Self report measures

Several types of measures were obtained from the questionnaire packet filled out by each subject. These included: ratings of themselves and their partner on measures of attractiveness, effectiveness and enjoyment during the

roleplays; the UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980); a specially constucted social competence questionnaire designed to reflect the subjects' degree of comfort in various social situations by asking the subject to state how "like me or not like me" a particular social behavior was; and three social situations story completion tasks based on Platt and Spivack's (1975) means-ends problem solving format which were designed to assess an individual's perception of their appropriate social behaviors in an open-ended format.

Photograph ratings

The color photos of the subjects were rated on a seven point scale of physical attractiveness by eight raters (5 female and 3 male raters). These raters also used a rating manual and achieved inter-rater reliability of r=.87 or better.

Results

Thirteen final variables used in the statistical analyses were derived from the original 246 by assigning the final variables to groups using a logical-empirical approach. Following a rational assignment to groups a multi-step factor analytic procedure culminated in the final 13 variables.

Differences in the groups were assessed using ANOVAs. Each analysis was three dimensional; high or low SSQN level of subject, sex of subject and high or low SSQN level of partner.

Experimenter ratings

The experimenter's intuitive assignment of subjects to correct social support categories was significant [$F(1,160) = 4.45$, $p<.04$]. The experimenter also rated those with high SSQN scores as significantly more

socially competent than those with low SSQN scores [F (1,160) = 8.16, p,.005]. A significant sex difference was found such that males were rated as less socially competent than females by the experimenter [F (1,160) = 7.05, p,.009].

Videotape ratings

Qualitative measures -- The most outstanding feature of the qualitative measures was the sex difference in rated social competence. Females were consistently rated as being more socially competent than males by independent raters. This was true for each of the five variables that made up the roleplay measure (p values ranging from .001 to .039) as well as the combined overall score which summarized the qualitative measures [F (1,140) = 9.97, p<.002].

Quantitative measures

Two of the three quantitative measures showed significant sex differences. Females spent more time looking at their partners than males did; this occurred both while they were speaking to their partner and while they were listening to their partner [F (1,162) = 14.50 and F (1,162) = 11.14, both at p<.001].

Subject's ratings of self and partner

Subjects in the high and low SSQN groups differed significantly in the expected direction in their evaluation of their own roleplay performance when rating levels of tension, enjoyment and feeling liked by their partner [F (1,164) = 5.54, p<.020]. This measure also showed a sex difference such that males rated themselves significantly higher than females [F (1,164) = 5.00, p<.03].

A combined rating for self and partner was broken down into three parts: separate ratings of attractiveness, enjoyment and effectiveness. Men's self-ratings of effectiveness tended to be higher than women's [F (1,164) = 3.74, p<.06 with means of 8.54 and 8.07 respectively]. When subjects rated their

partner's effectiveness, women rated their partners as more effective than men did [F (1,164) = 4.35, p<.04 with means of 8.64 and 9.15]. Subjects with high SSQN partners rated them as more effective than those who had low SSQN partners [F (1,164) = 14.32, p<.001 with means of 9.36 and 8.42]. Males rated themselves as enjoying the roleplays more than women [F (1,164) = 4.20, p<.04 with means of 11.06 and 10.45]. For the subject's self-rating of attractiveness there was an interaction such that men rated themselves as being more attractive when their partner was high in social support while women rated themselves as more attractive when their partner was low in social support [F (1,164) = 11.22, p<.001 with means for males of 2.51 and 2.17 for high vs. low partners and corresponding means for females of 2.14 and 2.37]. Attractiveness ratings of the partners showed a sex difference and a sex by partner's social support level interaction. Women rated their partners as more attractive than men rated their partners [F (1,164) = 9.59, p<.002 with means of 2.48 for men and 2.79 for women]. Men whose partners were low in social support rated them as less attractive than did any of the other three groups [F (1,164) = 5.65, p<.02 with means for low SSQN partners 2.31 for males and 2.86 for females and for high SSQN partners 2.65 for males and 2.73 for females].

Social situations story completion task

Subjects low in social support had lower ratings of effectiveness as measured by the number of positive situational behaviors they mentioned [F (1,160) = 15.86, p<.001]. Also, their self-ratings of comfort and effectiveness on the story completions were less than the high SSQN subjects [F (1,161) = 7.24, p<.008].

Questionnaire scores

Subjects in the low social support group reported much higher levels of

loneliness on the UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire than high SSQN subjects [F (1,161) = 46.00, p<.01]. A significant diffrence was also found between the two groups on the social competence questionnaire such that subjects in the high SSQN group reported higher levels of self-perceived social competence than low SSQN subjects [F (1,161) = 25.58, p<.001].

Photograph ratings

Males were rated as less attractive than females based on color still photos [F (1,171) = 30.15, p<.001].

Discussion

The results presented above suggest that individuals who differ in social support elicit differential reactions from others. People who describe themselves as having fewer social supports are described by the partners with whom they interact as less likeable and effective than individuals with higher levels of social support. The experimenter also was able to discriminate between high and low SSQN subjects. Social competence, measured in any of several ways, was consistently associated with a higher level of social support.

High SSQN subjects were rated higher than low SSQN subjects on a variety of specific skill components by independent raters. These same subjects mentioned a greater number of appropriate social behaviors and expressed more comfort and confidence with these behaviors. A subject's appraisal of her/his own social competence by means of a rating scale was in agreement with a test designed to measure knowledge of socially skilled behavior and with appraisal by others.

Our work suggests that social skill differences based on self-report data

that past experimenters have reported, can be taken as reasonably valid measures of social skill as perceived by others. This is reflected in the subjects' self-ratings, global experimenter and partner ratings, and quantitative/qualitative ratings of videotaped behavior all of which produced highly consistent appraisals of social skill level.

Males were consistently rated lower in social skills on a variety of measures and were seen as having fewer social supports by the experimenter. However, when self-ratings are considered, males rated themselves as more skilled than females although this was in disagreement with all other measures of their performance. A more generalized measure of social competence, the social competence questionnaire, did not show sex differences. Perhaps women's evaluations of their performance during specific situations are more stringent than are mens' but not when they evaluate their competence in more generalized, abstract situations. Although there were no sex differences on the loneliness dimension, there was a stronger relationship between loneliness and self-perceived lack of social competence for men than for women. Females also had a greater knowledge of socially skilled responses than males as measured by the story completion task. In addition, males and females differed on specific behaviors. Females spent more time looking at their partners when the partner was speaking and when they were speaking to the partner than males did. The vocal quality and quality of the interaction were more highly rated for females than males. It was also found that females were significantly more attractive than males by their partners and by independent raters. A variety of explanations might be put forth to shed light on these findings including different devlopmental social maturation for males and females, differences in socialization patterns and cultural stereotypes, sex differences in knowledge

of socially skilled behavior, and sampling from two distinct populations. It may be that the difference in attractiveness is a major contributing factor to the perceived social skill difference between the sexes (Goldman & Lewis, 1977; Gross & Crofton, 1977). However, it is clear from the data that social skills and/or available social support are not merely a function of physical attractiveness, but contain behavioral components as well.

The study described above does demonstrate that social support and social skills are related. The causal nature of the relationships are yet to be worked out. From a practical viewpoint the importance of this work is the impetus that the findings can give to those interested in understanding the components of social support and those who will want to focus on ways to help individuals wishing to increase their supportive relationships.

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